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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 000456

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SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN: FOREIGN MINISTER PESSIMISTIC ON NK
PROGRESS, VOICES CONCERN ABOUT GROWING RUSSIAN AND IRANIAN
POLICY IN REGION.

1 (C) SUMMARY. On May 27, Congressional Staff Delegation Markovsky and Katz met with Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov to discuss GOAJ relations with its neighbors. Despite reinforced ties with Turkey since Prime Minister Erdogan's visit, Azerbaijan is taking a wait-and-see approach regarding the Turkish-Armenian roadmap. Mammadyarov was pessimistic about further progress with Armenia on the issue of NK, as Armenian leadership has become more nationalistic in its tone. Regarding Iran, Mammadyarov said direct negotiation with Iran is good, but Iran wants nuclear weapons and will not change course on its nuclear program. Russian foreign policy in the region is to keep states weak and divided, and a nuclear-armed Iran serves Russia's wide Middle East policy. Azerbaijani relations with Israel are on a good footing and the GOAJ intends to follow through on its commitment to host the Israeli president in July despite pressure from Iran. END SUMMARY

A WAIT AND SEE APPROACH WITH TURKEY

12. (C) Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov referred to the recently announced Turkish-Armenia roadmap as evidence that Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan has strategy and vision, but noted that it is important for Erdogan to press for a resolution to Nagorno Karabakh (NK). Mammadyarov said it will be interesting to see how Turkish foreign policy in the region develops and that it will go only as far as Russia is willing to permit.

FOREIGN MINISTER: "WE ARE NOWHERE NOW" WITH ARMENIA

13. (C) Mammadyarov was pessimistic about future progress with Armenia on NK without external pressure. He said that at the Prague meeting on May 7, Armenia toughened its position, something he attributes to President Sargsian, whom Mammadyarov considers to be more nationalistic than his predecessor. (COMMENT: Sargsian is from NK, as Kocharian was, but is less secure politically with NK Armenians. Mammadyarov said that Sargsian's pursuit of an open border with Turkey comes from his political need to preserve NK without having to make concessions to Azerbaijan. END COMMENT)

14. (C) Mammadyarov said that he would prefer not to look too far into the future and instead to focus on getting the Armenians to agree to a withdrawal of its troops from the southern occupied territories, followed by a step-by-step approach that includes the opening of communications and the return of refugees. He said, however, that "we are nowhere" now with this Armenian administration and said he would be very surprised if there was progress June 4 at St. Petersburg

or a resolution on NK by year's end.

IRAN INCREASING INFLUENCE IN ARMENIA, BECOMING REGIONAL BULLY

15. (C) Mammadyarov said Iran is increasing its economic role inside Armenia and sells "cheap" natural gas to the Armenians. He also said Iran does not welcome open borders between Turkey and Armenia because it could decrease its influence with the Armenians. When asked what Azerbaijan's reaction would be to a nuclear-armed Iran, Mammadyarov said that although direct engagement with Iran was good, he was doubtful that anything could be achieved by it. He said it was a given that Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad will not alter his nuclear ambitions and that Azerbaijan would be sandwiched between two nuclear-armed states in the future. Mammadyarov said Iran has always expressed concern with Azerbaijan's cooperation with NATO and said Iran can be a bully state for the whole region.

RUSSIA FLEXING MUSCLES TO KEEP REGION WEAK, SEES NUCLEAR IRAN AS TOOL

16. (C) Mammadyarov admitted that part of his pessimism on NK stems partly from the role Russia has been playing in its near abroad. He said it is Russia's foreign policy goal to keep the region divided and weak and that Russia considers a nuclear-armed Iran as a tool in its broader Middle East policy.

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RELATIONSHIP WITH ISRAEL DEVELOPING

17. (C) Mammadyarov said economic relations with Israel were faring well and that Azerbaijan is hoping to expand its relationship into the agriculture sector. He said the military to military exchanges were also doing well and mostly included surveillance tactics and techniques. When asked about the upcoming July visit of the Israel president, Mammadyarov said Azerbaijan had extended the invitation months ago, but Israel had preferred not to issue an announcement. He said that despite Iran's pressure, the GOAJ would still host the Israeli president. (COMMENT: Mammadyarov said the GOAJ wanted to send a signal to Iran that it could not "push Azerbaijan around." END COMMENT)

Comment: Low Expectations for St. Petersburg

18. (C) The Foreign Minister's low expectations for the meeting of the presidents in St. Petersburg June 4 was typical of official sentiment in Baku regarding the summit in days leading up to it. Azerbaijan's leadership insists that President Aliyev is prepared to be constructive, as they say he was in Prague May 7, but do not believe that President Sargsyan is prepared or capable of bringing anything fruitful to the table. One way or the other it seems that Azerbaijan clearly wants to set the stage for fingers of blame to be pointed at Yerevan, should the St. Petersburg meeting not lead to a significant breakthrough.

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